

WHITHORN: THE MISSING YEARS

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Whithorn is perilously central to any study of Galloway in the Christian era. Apart from the various Lives of St Ninian and the Northumbrian records of the eighth-century bishops of Whithorn,¹ there are no reliable historical records of Galloway in the first millennium other than Ptolomey's topography,² the Ravenna Cosmography³ and the brief inscriptions on memorial stones. Without the Whithorn sources regional historians would have to rely solely on place-names, excavation evidence and the extrapolation of patterns and processes from neighbouring areas with fuller documentation. The centrality of Whithorn is perilous because it tends to conceal our fundamental ignorance of the history of the rest of Galloway.

Daphne Brooke has evolved a useful model for the chronology of Whithorn from c.400 AD until the Reformation.⁴ She identifies three bishoprics:

The First Bishopric pertains to the ministry of Ninian. It has no contemporary historians and information about it has been transmitted through the writings of the eighth and later centuries. The writers came from an alien cultural milieu, followed contemporary conventions and had their own ends firmly to the fore. They and their informants were responsible for the confection of an earlier, mythic 'history' of Whithorn and for its transmission to distant places and later centuries. The history and historic implications of this first bishopric is a favoured resort of scholars who have endowed it richly with circumstance despite the mythic quality of the evidence.⁵

The Second Bishopric comprises the Northumbrian succession of the eighth and early ninth centuries. This phase has an impeccable historical provenance founded on Bede and the Northumbrian annalists. It has left a unique testament in the *Miracula Nyniae Episcopi*⁶ which reveals the benign exploitation of a founder legend to instruct contemporary audiences and to attract status — and pilgrims — to a shrine remote from other Anglo-Saxon centres. The success of this Northumbrian propaganda is evident in the subsequent adoption of Whithorn and Ninian by retrospective Irish hagiographies.⁷ The last records of the Second Bishopric name one Heathured as bishop in c.833-6.⁸

The Third Bishopric begins some three centuries later in the third decade of the twelfth century with the consecration of Gilla-Aldan at York. Historical sources became more plentiful from then on, and, while there is still much to debate, the essential chronological framework is secure.

There were three main phases in the ecclesiastical history of Whithorn

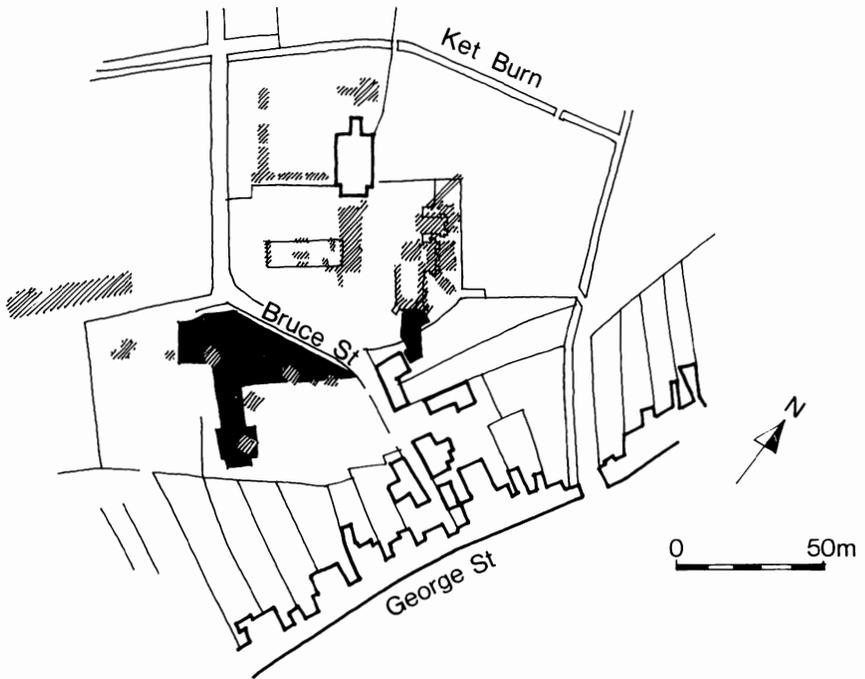


Fig.3.1 Excavations at Whithorn Priory; Whithorn Trust excavations in black, earlier work shaded.

before the Third Bishopric. The first phase, which encompasses the First Bishopric and whatever preceded and followed it, is beyond the scope of this paper. The second phase encompassing the Second Bishopric spans a hundred years or so from 731 to 833-6. The episcopal succession is certain, the existence of a monastery probable⁹ and organisational parallels can be sought elsewhere in the Northumbrian and English Churches. The third phase, which is the principal subject of this paper, is, perhaps, the most obscure. It encompasses the years from c.833 until the establishment of the Third Bishopric in c.1128. It has no contemporary historians and was of such little interest to later writers that it passed virtually unrecorded.¹⁰ In terms of historical records it represents the missing years in the development of Whithorn.

The Galloway Conference of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies effected an invaluable spring-cleaning of some of the dustier corners of Galwegian history. The mythic casualties included the no-longer-eponymous Gall-Gaidhil¹¹ while an incisive assault was launched against the fabulous eleventh-century Viking earldom of Galloway, and the



Fig.3.2 Aerial view of Whithorn Priory in 1989 showing location of main excavation trench.

attempts of archaeologists to create a history of this period from their scraps of evidence.¹²

The writer reported, *inter alia*, tantalising archaeological evidence of an Hiberno-Norse settlement close to the ruins of the medieval priory at Whithorn.¹³ These discoveries ran counter to the prevailing thrust of the conference, which in reviewing the extant evidence of Scandinavian contact with Galloway had found little of substance. The writer was rewarded to

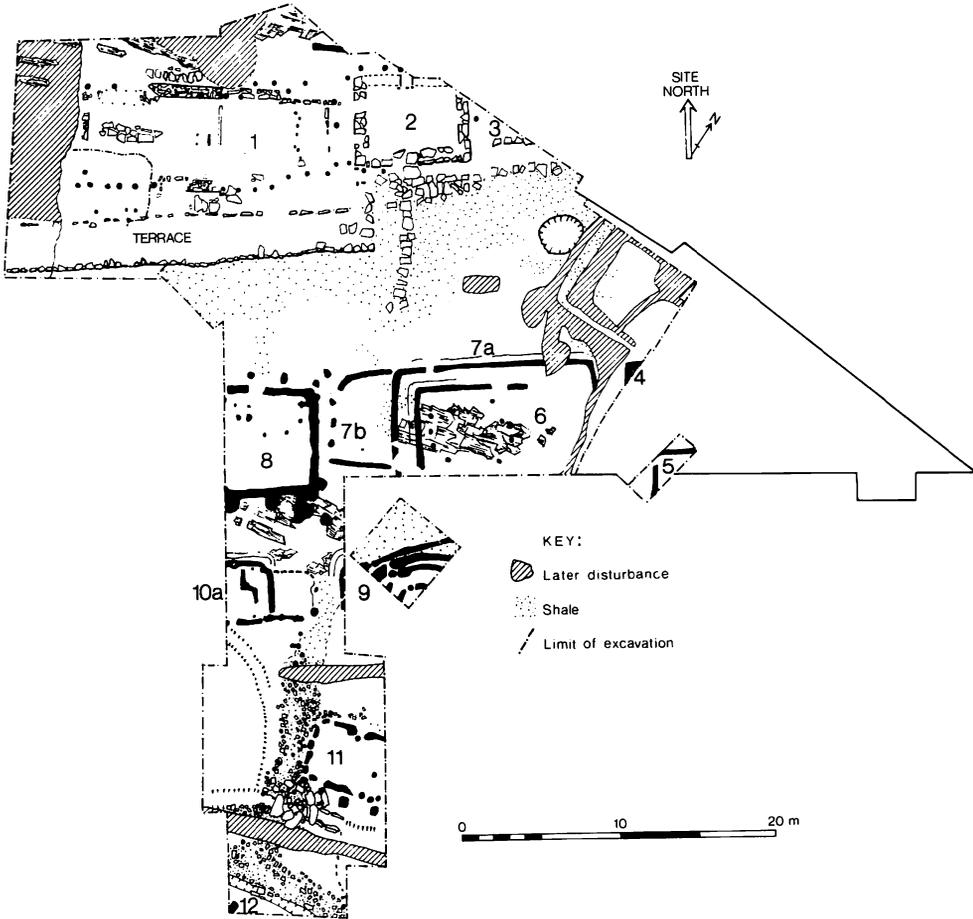


Fig.3.3 Northumbrian features of the eighth/ninth centuries.

see a significant contribution to the debate from the results of a small-scale excavation.

There have been major developments since the conference. Shortly afterwards the Whithorn Trust was established to continue the exploration of the site and five seasons of excavation are now complete (Figures 3.1 and 3.2). Much has been learnt of the 'Hiberno-Norse' settlement and still

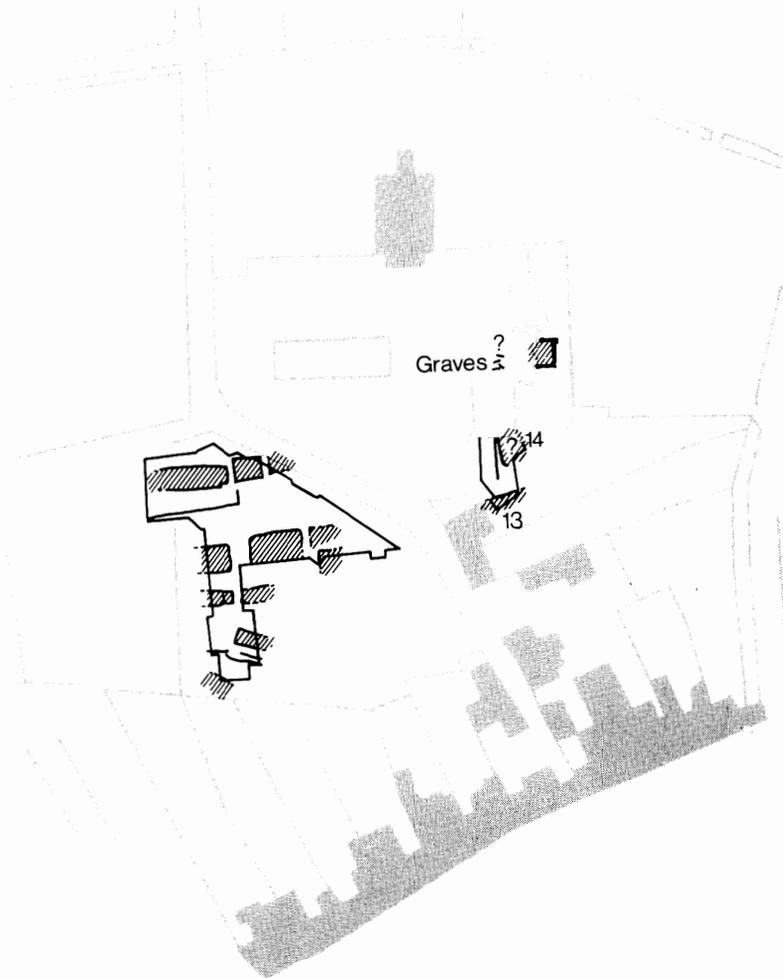


Fig.3.4 General plan of Northumbrian features at Whithorn.

more will be revealed when the structures and finds have been analysed in full.

The 'Hiberno-Norse' settlement occupied the south slope of the low hill now crowned by the priory ruins. This ground had been intensively settled by the Northumbrians by the early eighth century.¹⁴ Their regularly planned settlement (Figure 3:3) comprised a range of ecclesiastical buildings on the high ground (a church, burial chapel and children's graveyard); a terrace of large timber buildings on level ground half-way down; and smaller

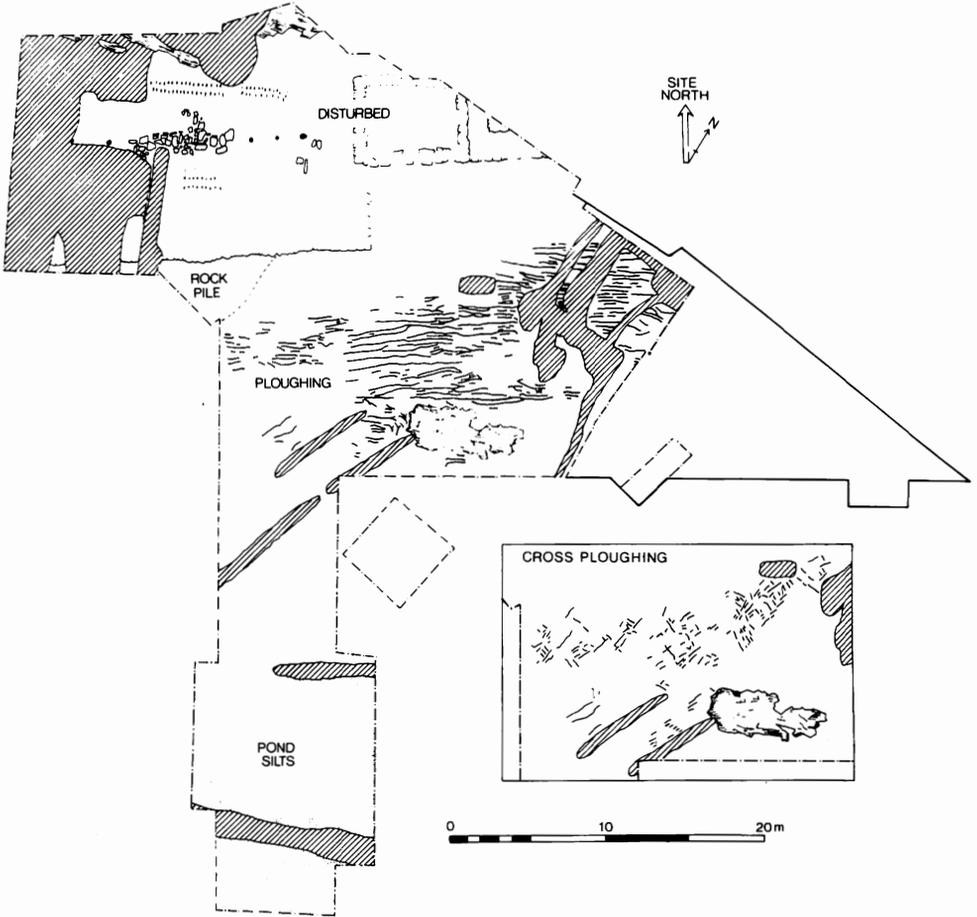


Fig.3.5 Whithorn in c.850 AD.

timber buildings on poorly-drained ground at the foot of the slope. Reassessment of earlier excavation evidence¹⁵ suggests that a further range of buildings underlies the twelfth-century cathedral and possibly included the principal church¹⁶ (Figure 3.4). The Northumbrian settlement had been abandoned by the mid ninth century. The ecclesiastical buildings were apparently ruinous, a shallow pond covered the remains at the foot of the slope while the intervening level ground had been ploughed (Figure 3.5).

The deposits above and below the plough soil have produced a rich assemblage of Northumbrian coins which date the ploughing with unusual precision (Table 1 below). Assuming that these finds give reliable evidence, the ploughing can be dated to the ultimate years of Eanred's reign or the first reign of his successor Aethelred II. The chronology of the Northumbrian kings at this time is debateable¹⁷ but the first reign of Aethelred II probably belongs within the period 840 to 860.

Table 1: Ninth-century events and coin finds.

Occupation — paving, fires, etc.
One coin of Osberht and a related irregular issue: c.849-855 ¹⁸
Fallow, demolition of church and related deposits Six coins of Aethelred II and one of Archbishop Wigimund: c.843-9 ¹⁹ and c.840-5 ²⁰
Midden
Twenty-three coins of Aethelred I and Eanred: c.790-6, 810-41

It is tempting to compress the evidence of decay and change into a picture of catastrophe and to correlate this with the known pattern of Viking raids on the British Isles in the late 830s and 840s²¹. This is inadmissible as the Northumbrian timber buildings were probably abandoned many years previously, while the church seems to have been dismantled with care rather than wantonly destroyed. The ploughing of a formerly settled area does, however, hint at troubled times — perhaps the same troubles that according to some sources brought Alpin, king of Scots, to a violent death in Galloway in 841.²²

A new phase of settlement, which began shortly after the ground was ploughed, survived for almost four hundred years until the ecclesiastical precinct was reorganised in about 1240.²³ Initial activity was marked by coins of the second reign of Aethelred II and subsequent occupation by two later Northumbrian issues (Table 1). Deposits on the middle and upper ground have produced small assemblages of ninth/tenth-century artefacts, while the structures on the lower ground date at the earliest to the eleventh century. The end of the settlement is marked definitively by the redevelopment of the occupied area as a cemetery in the mid-thirteenth

century. The archaeological evidence of the evolving settlement was complex and many of the deposits had been destroyed or damaged by later graves. Three principal phases of activity can be distinguished.

Phase 1 lasted from about 850 until about 1000.²⁴ There was occupation to either side of a road crossing the site comprising formless areas of paving without walls, doors or hearths. These structural remains probably represented a settlement, although the plans of individual buildings were elusive. A sparse collection of finds included late Northumbrian coins (Table 1), a penny of Eadgar (c.959-75), a Scandinavian harness fitting, antler combs and ring-headed pins. Manufacturing debris, which characterised Phases 2 and 3, was rare. There was clearly Scandinavian contact, but neither Scandinavian settlement or dominion can be demonstrated.

Phase 2 (Figure 3.6) lasted from about 1000 until perhaps the mid-twelfth century. The earlier settlement was expanded by draining the shallow pond at the foot of the slope, probably by cutting ditches where the Ket Burn heads eastwards from modern Whithorn. Drains were then cut through the moist silts of the former lake bed and new houses were built. A radiocarbon date of 1015 to 1220 AD²⁵ was obtained from a stake used in one of these houses. There were numerous phases of rebuilding after the original houses decayed, suggesting a thriving community replacing and renovating its homes.

The economic basis of the settlement was indicated by the manufacturing debris and imported artefacts. The ditch at the foot of the slope produced abundant evidence of leather-working, while antler-working debris (often reflecting the manufacture of single-sided combs) was spread over most parts of the site. Iron-working was demonstrated by ore, bloomery slag, smithy waste and finishing tools; lead-working by spilt metal, scarfs and hack-metal awaiting recasting. Finer crafts were poorly represented. Glass tesserae suggested an episode of jewellery-work,²⁶ and occasional crucible sherds indicated work in copper alloy, silver or gold. Certain crafts were strikingly absent. There was little evidence of wood-turning and, indeed, mature timber was rare. No fabrics were found in the waterlogged deposits and evidence of thread and fabric production was sparse. Relatively late deposits produced Hiberno-Norse stick-pins, beads and distinctive jars with a red, gritty fabric.

The Hiberno-Norse label attached to this settlement depends upon the artefacts associated with it and must be treated circumspectly. Almost all the articles — stick-pins, beads, knives, soapstone and the like — were readily portable, and the whole collection would scarcely fill a pedlar's pack. The most telling artefacts were the houses which were, by definition, non-portable. The best-preserved house (Figure 3.7) is strikingly similar to Viking buildings at Dublin²⁷ (Figure 3.8) and Waterford,²⁸ themselves believed to be a unique adaptation of an Irish vernacular tradition to the

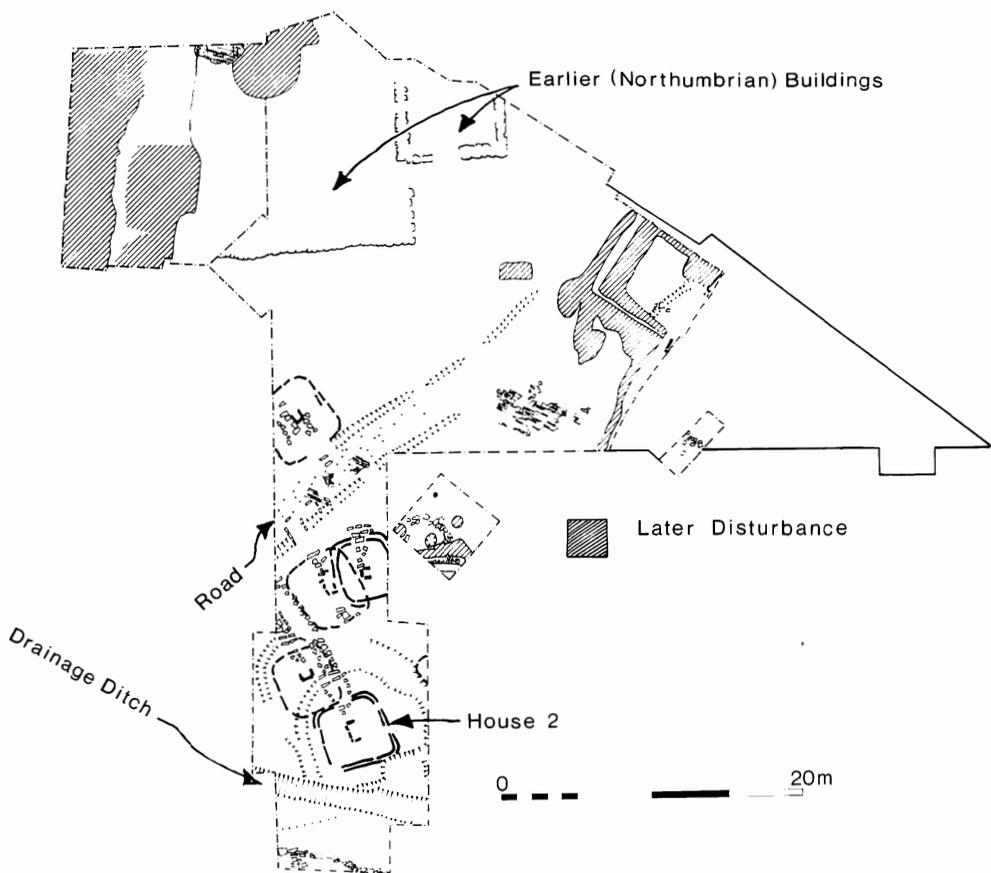


Fig.3.6 Phase 2 settlement.

specialised needs of Hiberno-Norse towns. There is as yet no corpus of tenth/eleventh-century buildings in southern Scotland to compare and contrast with the Whithorn examples. The significance of their Irish affinities is difficult to assess. They might have been a local adaptation of the Irish style, or could equally indicate the presence of settlers from the Irish towns.

Phase 3 lasted from the mid-twelfth century until the mid-thirteenth century. The former settlement layout survived, while a new building type appeared. Manufacture remained important, and one building was abutted by a dump of smelting and smithying debris associated with broken or discarded finishing tools. By this time trading patterns had changed. New

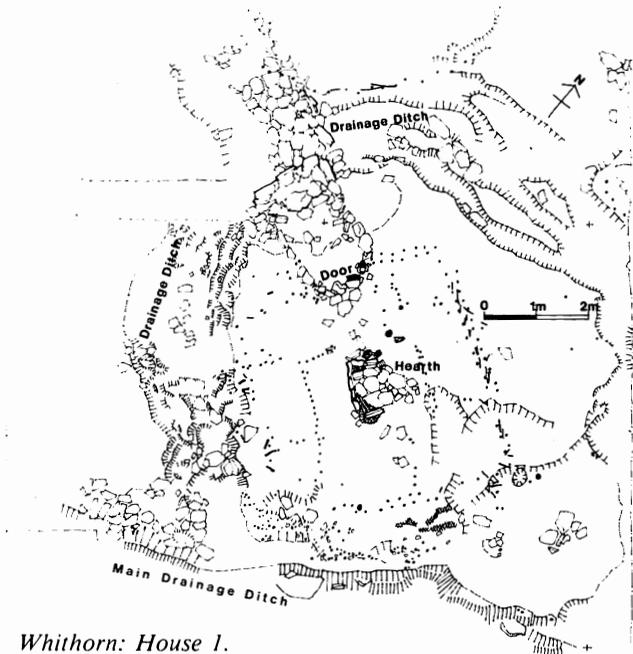


Fig.3.7 Whithorn: House 1.

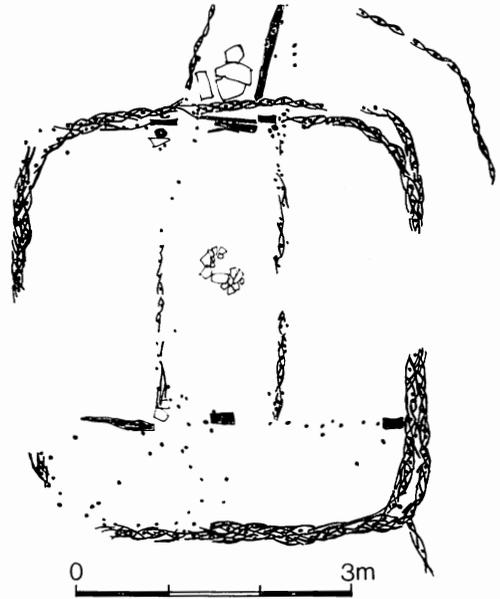


Fig.3.8 House 9/1, High Street, Dublin (after Murray, 1983).

wheel-turned pottery types and been introduced from the east and the supply of distinctive Hiberno-Norse artefacts had dried up.

This phase probably followed the reformation of the church and was contemporary with the building of the new cathedral and priory, representing the continuing development of the earlier settlement in a changing economic climate. The demise of the settlement in the mid-thirteenth century may have reflected the final subjugation of Galloway to the Scottish Crown in 1235 or, perhaps, the transfer of Whithorn's status

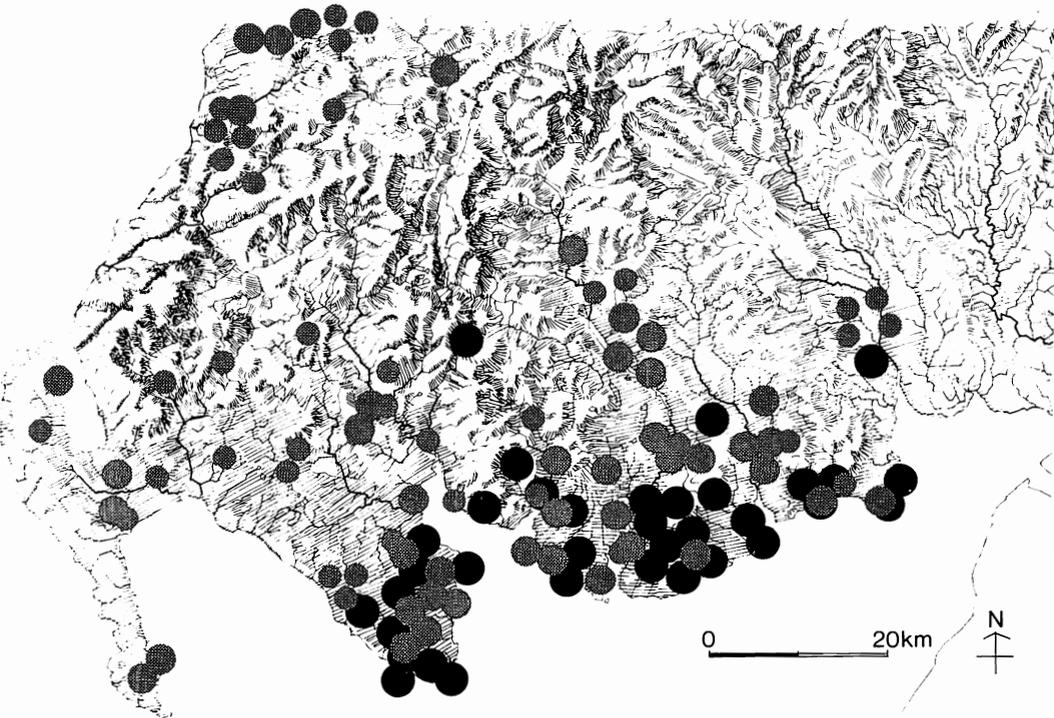


Fig. 3.9 Scandinavian place names (black) superimposed on British and Anglian place names (grey).

as a centre of trade to Wigtown, which became the seat of the new royal sheriff and the shire administration by the middle of the thirteenth century.

The foregoing paragraphs attempt an objective summary of the excavation evidence. Dating is imprecise, the evolving status of the settlement unknown and the origin of its inhabitants uncertain. Isolated from the wider context of contemporary society, it is of limited value. A fuller picture requires further evidence.

The most important contribution comes from the place-names. Gillian Fellows-Jensen's valuable contribution in this volume is supplemented by published and unpublished papers by Daphne Brooke²⁹ on place-name patterns throughout Galloway. These studies reveal a striking correspondence in the distribution of Northumbrian and Scandinavian place-names in Galloway (Figure 3.9), indicating a coherent link between these apparently distinct phases of settlement. The Northumbrian names occur in extensive geographical blocks separated by blank areas where British names survive. Several possible centres can be identified, such as the ecclesiastical site at Whithorn, Kirkcudbright and Edingham³⁰ and the secular strongholds at Arsbottl in the Glenkens and Cruggleton³¹ on the east coast of the Machars. These 'blocks' were probably estates, or more properly multiple estates settled by Anglian speakers and under Northumbrian control.³² The intervening areas were presumably still occupied by the original British inhabitants and controlled by British potentates. This territorial landscape was probably organised, or perhaps merely redistributed, as the Northumbrians took control of Galloway in the late seventh or early eighth centuries.

There is nothing remarkable in this picture. It reflects a pattern recorded reliably in the eastern parts of Northumbria³³ and reconstructable elsewhere in southern Scotland.³⁴ It seems to have been an enduring pattern of both organisation and settlement.³⁵ Many of the British and Northumbrian place-name elements emerge uncorrupted in the charters of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, indicating that the fabric and peoples of the territorial landscape survived the collapse of Northumbrian control in the ninth century.

The Scandinavian names are less widespread than their Anglian precursors and generally occupy smaller, more compact areas within the large blocks of Northumbrian settlement. These areas seem too small to have been won by conquest and then held against hostile neighbours. They were probably acquired as the result of negotiations³⁶ equally appropriate to all the *coastal* territories of the former Northumbrian hegemony. The striking absence of Scandinavian names from the 'British' territories suggests that either they were excluded from the deal if it was favourable, or else were strong enough to resist if it were unfavourable.

The regional pattern of Scandinavian settlement within the former Northumbrian coastal territories suggests the context for the tenth- to

twelfth-century settlement at Whithorn. Throughout this period, activity was focused on a road leading south from the crown of the hill towards the Isle of Whithorn³⁷ (Figures 3.10 and 3.11). By the eleventh century this road was lined with the dwellings of artisans processing raw materials probably produced in the hinterland of the Machars (antler and hides) and more distant parts of Galloway (iron and lead). The settlement was probably a trading post processing a limited range of locally produced raw materials, trading on the products and importing luxuries and commodities from a trade network linking the lands around the Irish Sea with the main

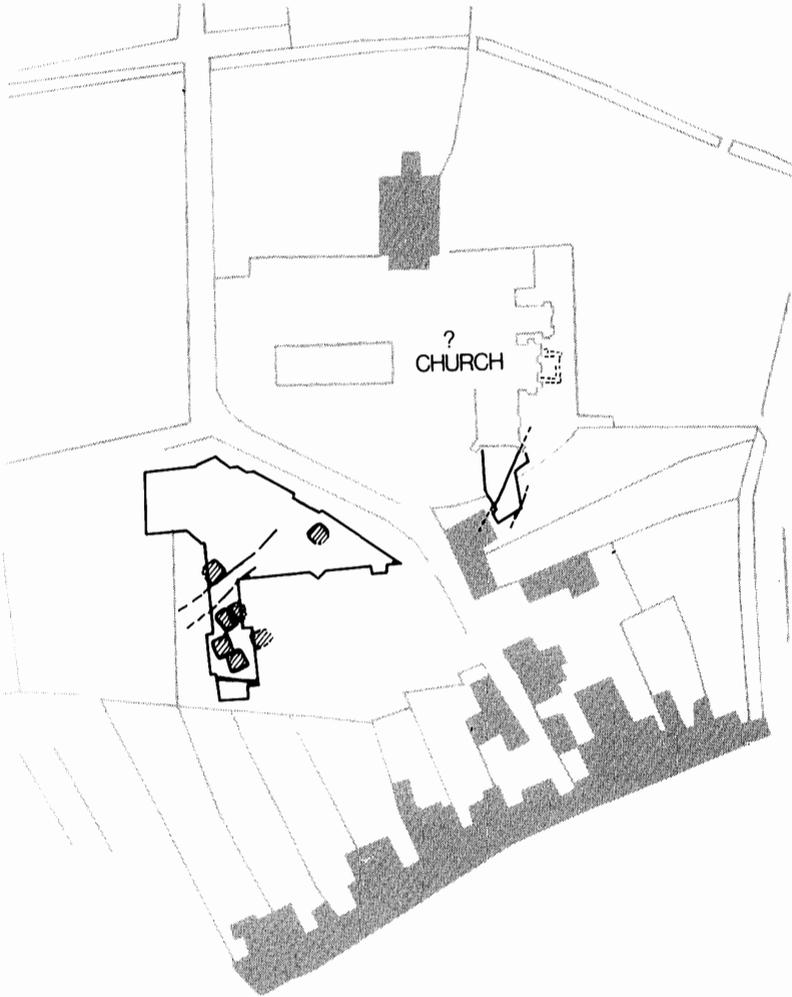


Fig.3.10 General plan of Whithorn in c. 1050 AD showing possible site of church.

Scandinavian seaways. The natural harbour at the Isle of Whithorn would have been an ideal port for carrying these products outwards.

Why was Whithorn chosen as a production centre? Physical geography does not seem to commend it and, indeed, the settlement site was derelict and partly flooded when first occupied. The most economical explanation is that the former economic and social status of the site had been sustained in the centuries after the collapse of Northumbria, or had perhaps been

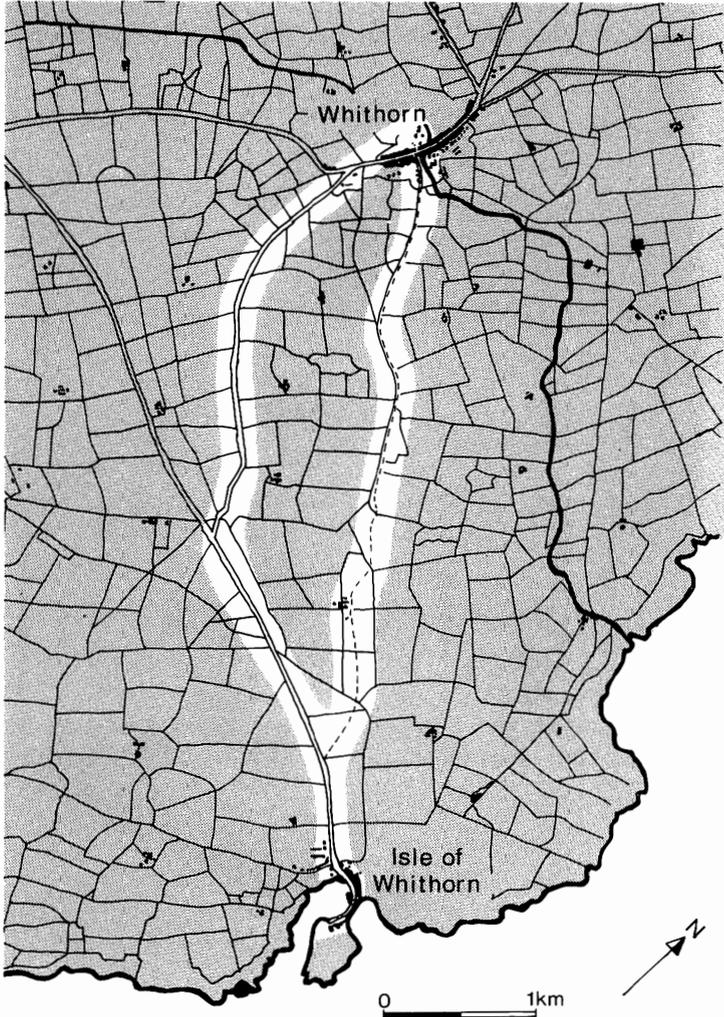


Fig.3.11 Possible routes linking Whithorn and the Isle of Whithorn.

revived under new masters. Continuing or revived ecclesiastical status is indicated by the 'Whithorn School' of sculptured crosses. Derek Craig's masterly reassessment of these and other sculptures³⁸ points to a parallel ecclesiastical landscape with Whithorn the centre of a new system of parishes. The phenomenon is confined to the Machars, where it embraces Northumbrian, Scandinavian and British territories.

There thus seems to have been two co-existing systems in the Machars, both focused on Whithorn. The first system, linking the polyglot, cosmopolitan peoples of Galloway in a new economic network of coastal trade, was based on former Northumbrian territories and extended throughout the Solway coast. The second is a new system of ecclesiastical organisation confined to the Machars, but disregarding linguistic and territorial boundaries. The symbiosis of these two systems means that a settlement of Hiberno-Norse artisans and traders at Whithorn can be postulated without requiring a Norse aristocracy or Norse Church leaders. An eleventh-century trading post, town or proto-town has now been identified at Whithorn, but there is no need to bring Kari Solmundarson on the tortuous trail from Berwick. We can leave him happily at Whitburgh, Berwickshire³⁹ and furnish Whithorn with a church, a people and an economy from the integrated study of place-names, sculptured stones and excavation evidence.

The introductory paragraphs stressed the incompleteness of the historical records of Whithorn and cautioned against the 'perilous centrality' of Whithorn to the history of Galloway. In the following pages we have attempted to fill one of the larger gaps in the historical record. The 'perilous centrality' can perhaps be redefined. I suspect that Whithorn was indeed central to the economic and social affairs of the Machars for most of the Christian era until the Reformation. It was, however, merely one of a series of centres in Galloway which reflect an enduring infrastructure of peoples and territories. The remarkable new evidence from Whithorn should be treated less as a confirmation of centrality and more as a taster for what awaits discovery at other centres.



The Whithorn Project has enjoyed the dedicated commitment of a vast and international team, and we have been enriched by discussions with numerous visiting scholars. The ideas offered here are corporate, even though the presentation is personal. I am particularly indebted to Daphne Brooke for unrestricted access to her data and for a shared enthusiasm in the early history of Whithorn.

Notes

1. Plummer, C, *Venerabilia Baedae Opera Historica*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1986); Forbes, A. P., *Lives of S Ninian and S Kentigern* (Edinburgh, 1874); MacQueen, W., 'Miracula Nynie Episcopi', *TDGAS*, 38 (1960), 21-57.

2. Rivet, A. L. F., and Smith, C. C., *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London, 1979), 103-47.
3. Rivet and Smith, *Place-Names*, 148-215.
4. Daphne Brooke, *Parish of Whithorn*; manuscript account of early place-name forms in Wigtownshire. I am grateful to Daphne Brooke for allowing me access to this and other unpublished studies.
5. Optimistic historiography is epitomised by the Reverend William Cumming Skinner's delightful *Candida Casa: the Apostolic Centre of Scotland* (Dundee, 1931). Optimism prevails in much of the 'mainstream' literature, notably the Whithorn volume (35, 1950) of the *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, which includes Norah Chadwick's imaginative 'St Ninian: A preliminary study of the sources', and Douglas Simpson's articulate and combative 'The Ninian controversy'. More recent works, such as Professor Charles Thomas's *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London, 1985) are more cautious but still identify concrete evidence of the early church.
6. MacQueen, 'Miracula'.
7. Wilson, P. A., 'St Ninian and Candida Casa: Literary evidence from Ireland', *TDGAS*, 41 (1964), 156-85.
8. Dumville, D. N., 'Textual archaeology and Northumbrian history subsequent to Bede', in Metcalf, D. N., *Coinage in Ninth Century Northumbria* (British Archaeological Report 180, 1987).
9. Internal evidence of a monastery in the 'Miracula Nynie Episcopi' has been discussed by Charles Thomas in 'Ardwall Isle; the excavation of an Early Christian site of Irish type', *TDGAS*, 34 (1966), 84-116.
10. The writer shares Professor E. Cowan's disbelief in the identification of Hwitburg with Whithorn and is dubious about the supposed visit to Whithorn of St Cuthbert's relics in the late ninth century.
11. This volume.
12. This volume.
13. Initially reported in Hill, P. H., *Excavations at Bruce Street, Whithorn 1984: interim report* SDD (A. M.), (Edinburgh, 1984). Subsequent work is summarised in Hill, P. H., *Whithorn 1: 1986 Excavations* (Whithorn Trust, 1987); Hill, P. H., *Whithorn 2: Excavations 1984-87: interim report* (Whithorn Trust, 1988); Hill, P. H., *Whithorn Supplement; 1988 Excavation* (Whithorn Trust, 1988) and Hill, P. H., *Whithorn 3: Excavations 1988-90: interim report* (Whithorn Trust, 1990).
14. Discussed briefly in Hill, *Whithorn 3*.
15. These excavations are described in Radford, C. A. R., 'Excavations at Whithorn, 1949', *TDGAS*, 27 (1950), 85-126 and Cruden, S., *The Scotsman Weekend Magazine* 4th May 1963. They are further discussed in Thomas, 'Ardwall Isle' and *Christianity in Roman Britain*.
16. Hill, *Whithorn 3*.
17. I am grateful to Miss E. J. E. Pirie for identifying and reporting upon the Northumbrian coins found in 1984-89. For the chronology of Northumbrian reigns see Lyon, S., 'Ninth century Northumbrian chronology', in Metcalf, *Coinage in Ninth Century Northumbria*.
18. Traditional dates deriving from Symeon of Durham and disputed by Lyon,

- 'Ninth century Northumbrian chronology' and Dumville, 'Textual archaeology'.
19. Ibid.
 20. Dating proposed by Dumville, 'Textual archaeology'.
 21. Ulster Annals, Annals of the Picts and Scots, discussed briefly by Smyth, A. P., *Warlords and Holymen* (London, 1984) and Crawford, B. E., *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987), 48-51.
 22. Discussed by Professor E. Cowan, this volume.
 23. The site of the former settlement was used as a graveyard divided by a ditch from new fields to the west (Hill, *Whithorn* 3).
 24. Dated by coins and, to a lesser extent, radiocarbon dates from the burials. The former included two pennies of Henry III (1216-72) including one minted at Bury St. Edmunds in 1247-72. Radiocarbon assays gave four dates, calibrated and quoted at the 95% confidence level: 1045 x 1390 AD (GU-2056, 755 +/- 80 bp), 1275 x 1435 AD (GU-2051, 595 +/- 50 bp) and 1240 x 1390 AD (GU-2050 +/- 55 bp).
 25. The radiocarbon date of 1015-1220 CAL AD (GU-2053, 935 +/- 50 bp) has been adapted to historical convention and is quoted at the 95% confidence level.
 26. The tesserae were all recovered from a cluster of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century graves. They had, perhaps, been displaced from earlier eleventh to thirteenth century deposits.
 27. Discussed in detail in Murray, H., *Viking and Early Medieval Buildings in Dublin* (British Archaeological Report 119, 1983), summarised by Wallace, P. F. and O Floinn, R., *Dublin 1000: Discovery and Excavation in Dublin, 1842-1981* (Dublin, 1988) and Edwards, N., *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (London, 1990), 178-88.
 28. Described in Hurley, M., 'Recent archaeological excavations in Waterford City', *Archaeol Ireland*, 2 pt. 1 (1988), 17-21, summarised in Edwards, *Early Medieval Ireland*.
 29. Brooke, D., 'The Northumbrian settlement of Galloway and Carrick', *PSAS* 119 (forthcoming).
 30. Brooke, D., 'The Deanery of Desnes Cro and the Church of Edingham', *TDGAS*, 62 (1987), 48-65.
 31. Brooke, 'Galloway and Carrick'.
 32. Excavation at Cruggleton has revealed what may be parts of a seventh to ninth century hall, Ewart, G., *Cruggleton Castle: Report of Excavations 1978-81* (Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society Occasional Paper, Dumfries, 1985).
 33. See for example Barrow, G. W. S., *The Kingdom of the Scots* (London, 1973), Chapter 1.
 34. See for example Smith, I., 'Late Anglian settlement patterns in the Tweed basin', in Faull, M. L. (ed), *Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon Settlement* (Oxford, 1984).
 35. This toponymic model has received remarkable archaeological support from a Northumbrian deposit at Whithorn. This deposit contained a vast quantity of animal bones apparently the debris from a great feast. The bones can be interpreted as the remains of renders in kind from a large and well-organised estate (Hill, *Whithorn* 2).

36. *Sensu lato* and *pace* Cowan. 'Negotiation' can be amicable or hostile. Various options include mercenary service (the Anglo-Saxon option), purchase, dynastic marriage or plantation by improving landlords.
37. The early forms (Biscoby, 1456 (Calendar of Papal Letters) and Byscoby, 1478 (Calendar of Papal Letters XIII)) of the place-name Bysbie which survives at the Isle of Whithorn offer tantalising hint of a Bishop's Bu in control of the economically vital harbour. It might be a Scandinavian form of an earlier Northumbrian name, a Scandinavian name in its own right, or a later formation reflecting ownership by the High to Late Medieval bishops of Whithorn.
38. This volume.
39. I am grateful to Daphne Brooke and Professor Geoffrey Barrow for suggesting this identification of Hwitiburg.